



Luxe Burger Bar opening in Springfield in December, promises transformation of old Visitors Information Center on riverfront

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SPRINGFIELD — The former Visitors Information Center at 1200 Hall of Fame Ave. was built to grab people's attention; it was not built for serving food.

But by the time **Luxe Burger Bar** opens in early December it will do both, said restaurateur John Elkhay.

Elkhay and Tom Cox of Chicopee-based Gardner Construction Industrial Services described last week how the building's tower, visible from Interstate 91, will soon be home to a suspended lighted sculpture with a 30-foot-long fabric wave. The fabric, besides being eye-catching, will serve as a noise baffle to dampen echoes in the glassed-in space where a replica of a Gee-Bee airplane once hung.

"At night it is going to be spectacular," Cox said.

The building is just up the block from the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame on a street also known as West Columbus Ave.

Elkhay said he hopes to use late November to stock the kitchen and train a staff of about 90 local employees.

Elkhay, a veteran of the business who opened his first restaurant in 1997 after cooking for years, and business partner at **Chow Fun Food Group** Rick Bready, are bringing their Luxe Burger concept here from Providence, R.I. Locally, they are working with developer Lustra LLC, a company that includes local lawyer **Raipher D. Pellegrino**.

In December 2011, the Springfield Redevelopment Authority selected Lustra as the preferred developer for the old visitors center after the center moved into smaller space in the Hall of Fame building.

Lustra bought property from the authority for \$450,001, the high bid in a public request for proposals process. At the time, the whole project was pegged at \$2.3 million. The developers said they expect to create \$96,250 in annual tax revenue for the city.

Last week, Cox and Elkhay declined to say just how much renovations actually cost. But they had to install equipment and bury a grease trap in the parking lot.



Tom Cox, left, project manager for Gardner Construction and Industrial Services Inc. of Chicopee, talks with restaurateur John Elkhay of Rhode Island, right, as work continues on the Luxe Burger Bar at the former Visitors Information Center on West Columbus Avenue on Springfield's riverfront.

The Republican / Michael S. Gordon

"We literally had to create everything from scratch," Cox said. "Including all the windows because the windows that were here had failed."

Thursday, a welder was installing a code-required hatchway from the kitchen to the roof.

"As long as you turn the building over to me on Nov. 15," Elkhay said, teasing Cox about all the work that still has to be done.

Elkhay said it is much cheaper to take over a failed restaurant, one with a kitchen and bathrooms where the new owner just has to redecorate. But that would have meant

missing out on what he thinks is a great location, visible from Interstate 91 and in the same complex as the **Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame**, Plan B Burger, Max's Tavern, Cold Stone Creamery, j. Quincy's and Samuel's Sports Bar, Subway, UNO Chicago Grill and the now-vacant Mama Iguana's space, which is for rent.

Elkhay said he wants to be in an area with other restaurants and bars. The original Providence Luxe Burger is in the middle of Providence's WaterFire.

"It is counter-intuitive to someone who hasn't been in the business," he said. "But I want a lot of people coming here. Once they do, I have a one-in-five shot of getting them to eat here."

Quality ingredients — the beef is custom cut Hereford — and price will bring folks in, Elkhay said.

Make-your-own burgers are \$7.99. And Luxe offers so many different choices of bread, meat, tuna, turkey or vegetarian patty, dressings, vegetables, bacon, dressings, fries or tater tots, that an MIT mathematician told Elkhay that there are more than 400,000 different combinations.

The children's meal is \$6 and includes a sundae.

"During the day it's going to be a family-friendly restaurant," Elkhay said. "After 10 p.m. we are really going for the friendly bar atmosphere with a lot of great beer choices."

That bar atmosphere will include transplanting the Providence location's popular trivia nights.

"We get the same people every week. The college kids come to compete, the older people come to show the college kids a thing or two. I have always wanted to do a spelling bee. Can you imagine anything better than getting someone with a few cocktails in them to try and spell?"

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